

ADOLESCENCE, ADOPTION AND IDENTITY

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Early identity theory:

Focused on aspects of choice – how we to a sense of self through selection of values, vocations and relationships

Erikson saw adolescence as the stage where identity is the major focus and task

“identity achievement” is a positive status resulting from an “identity crisis” – a time limited, confusing and distressing period that sets the foundation for emotionally healthy adulthood.

Process leads to integrated sense of SELF from many selves, refined over a lifetime.

Its opposite is identity confusion



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Later theorists challenged notion of crisis (reframed as intensive exploration)

Added consideration of non-chosen aspects – gender, sexual orientation, race

A deep consideration of the fundamental question of “Who Am I?” which is dynamic rather than complete and extends into young adulthood and beyond

The physical, cognitive and emotional changes of adolescence allows/forces ongoing process of reflection and consolidation

Greater understanding of the influence of familial, cultural and historical influences on identity

In addition to “confusion” and “achievement”, later theorists describe alternate identity statuses such as foreclosure and moratorium (Marcia)



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Adoptive identity - further expands the concept by focusing on an aspect of self that is neither chosen or inborn. Further, acknowledges the influence of external messages – from familial to societal

Grotevant and others emphasize that adoption status is an ascribed status, unlike gender or race in that it is the decision of others that create this status .

Further others often retain control of aspects of the adoption story

This ascribed rather than innate or chosen aspect of adoption can contribute to identity struggles, including a challenge to sense of autonomy



It's scary when you are adopted because it's like Russian Roulette, where they could have handed you off to anybody. I think about that a lot.

Sometimes I think about – “what if my family hadn't answered when DCFS called? Where would I be?”



Some adolescents struggle with the “what if” (including what if they had remained in their original families)

Others cope by ascribing their adoption to God or to fate – that this family was “meant to be”. Often a message shared by parents – which may be challenged by peers and cultural messages



UNEXAMINED IDENTITY

Dunbar and Grotevant (2004) study of adolescent narratives found 4 statuses:

[Illustrated by Howard's qualitative study of adopted adolescent and young adult women]

Unexamined identity: the adolescent thinks little about being adopted and sees it as unimportant or of little importance to who he/she is

Adoption isn't really a big issue in my life.

I didn't know them and I think who you are is not from where you were born but from how and where you are raised.

I think that's why people never realize I'm adopted, where with some people you can really tell.

My parents made me. They didn't form me physically, but they made me who I am

LIMITED IDENTITY

Demonstrated by some consideration of the meaning of being adopted, some questions and possible desire to know more, but lack of a strong need to mull over or discuss adoption – is “matter of fact”

Adoption isn't something that sat in front of me my whole life

It was an issue at a time in my life but it's not a big issue any longer

Our family has problems, but every family has problems

It wasn't like our family was different from other families

And I didn't get up every morning and go, “Today I'm adopted”

I don't think much about it unless something triggers it.



UNSETTLED IDENTITY

Considerable time and effort is put into thinking about adoption and “working through” being adopted, included both negative and positive views but the work is incomplete and may feel like struggle

I have this history, and if I tell people I’m adopted, what does it do to all the history I’ve made? Does that make it less valid?

I guess I would rather be in a sort of denial about it and let my life just be...

Is that who I am? Is that what makes me as a person?

But I’ve met my birthmother, and that matters, too.

You have to think about “who am I”?

How did I become this way?

I realize that’s something I’m feeling everyday.



INTEGRATED IDENTITY

Results from thought and consideration about being adopted and the meaning of adoption – its influence on his or her life. The adolescent has synthesized both positive and negative aspects of adoption into a current sense of self.

I think being adopted has influenced almost every aspect of my personality and my life.

It's why I plan to be a teacher, it's why I want to be a mother, it's how I know what to do and what NOT to do.

The things that have happened to me [abuse and neglect in original home, complicated relationships with birth sibs and original parents] have made me crazy at times, but they have made me strong, too.

And so has the love and support of my parents.



SPECIAL CHALLENGES TO IDENTITY OF ADOPTION

1. Lack of information, contact, relationships and context
2. Sense of difference and lack of models – rarely is anyone in the youth's immediate family adopted.

[I said to my mom] You know who you came from, your history.

Why can't you understand how hard it is for me that I don't have that?

Brodzinsky's stress and coping model of adoption adjustment

3. Inauthentic discourse (taboos, subtle messages of disapproval, sense of disloyalty). Youth may hide search efforts and even relationships or downplay them.
4. Disenfranchised grief – lack of acknowledgement, methods or support for recognizing loss
5. Pervasive, often simplistic cultural messages that stigmatize and idealize adoption

ADOLESCENCE, ADOPTION, RACE/ETHNICITY AND ADOPTION

“Beyond Culture Camp” - Donaldson Adoption Institute’s major study of adoption identity in Korean born adults adopted by White parents and White adults adopted by White parents in a larger study of 468 adopted adults

Respondents reported adoption was an important aspect of their identity across their lifespans, increasing in adolescence and peaking in young adulthood.

81% of adults adopted from Korea and 70% of white adults reported it was important or very important in adolescence or young adulthood.

Both groups had experienced discrimination due to adoption. Extended family was biggest source for whites, strangers for Koreans.

Korean born adopted adults also reported race-based discrimination – 80% from strangers, 74% from classmates and 39% from teachers.

Commonly felt parents or other adults were unaware and unprepared to help

ADOPTION...

*In junior high one of my nicknames was
“Chink”...*



FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

Can/ should it be the role of others to help the adopted person have an achieved adoptive identity? If so, what would help?

*Preparation and ongoing support

open communication patterns between parents and adopted youth positively influence youth adjustment

*Connection during early years and in adolescence is associated with higher levels of emotional expression and positive sense of self in adolescence and emerging adulthood

Disclosure – suited to the child and youth's stage of development

Groups – reducing isolation, connecting youth to others who are adopted

Lifebooks (importance of physical resemblance, foundation for coherent narrative)

